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# Between Platonic Love and Internet Pornography

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**Abstract** The article sets out to show how an holistic approach in matters of sexuality is always more helpful than one-sided approaches. On the issue of internet pornography, the authors suggest that the recent anti-masturbation online movement ‘no fapping’ is based on wrong conclusions from insufficient evidence. We suggest that a holistic approach is called for, with emphasis on the embodied human. Abstinence or what is understood by ‘Platonic love’ is not a solution, according to Plato himself. From a phenomenological perspective, we suggest owning up to our strange bodies and habitualising sexual activity.

**Keywords** Phenomenology · Pornography · Internet · Internet porn · Platonic love · Plato · Levinas · Merleau-Ponty · Nancy · Eros · Flirtation · Body · Corporeality · Masters and Johnson · Masters of Sex · Desire · Strangeness · Dialogue

At its heart, though, you might say that *Masters of Sex*—the book and the show—is a postmodernist parable about the limits of science; how modern medicine can never truly understand our deepest, most intimate feelings. Masters’ and Johnson’s study of hormones and electrocardiogram impulses could deepen our understanding of our own skin and corpuscles, but alone it could not touch the soul, the essence of the bond between two people. (Maier 2014)

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Bodies are strangers to one another thanks to the foreignness of the spirit that animates them. This extraneousness constitutes their strangeness. Not only are bodies strange, but they do not recognize one another and approach one another only with difficulty, obliged to overcome at least a certain mistrust, and sometimes a fear or even repulsion. A body does not easily touch another body, because it knows that this proximity threatens to strike them both down in a new flaring up of the desire of spirit.

(Nancy 2013)

The purpose of this essay is to show that we are still jumping to hasty and faulty conclusions around issues of sexuality. This is due to a lack of critical discussions in the area that continues, in academic as well as general discourse. We will use the issue of internet porn and currently popular versions of an ‘abstinence’ proposal as our case in point, arguing for a more balanced, holistic, existential approach that considers who we are as embodied human beings. We would like to follow in the footsteps of Virginia Johnson whose contribution Maier describes as follows: “In many ways, she was leading the way, fashioning a more thorough, integrated approach to dealing with human sexuality than he ever envisioned” (Maier 2009, 149).

What we need to improve our sex lives are better abilities to communicate to each other, across sexuate differences, and for sexuality research to become more holistic, communicate between approaches or become interdisciplinary, as the subtitle of this journal has it.

In recent years, it has been established that our contemporary technologized world has an impact on our sex lives. This holds true in a number of general, not yet fully explored ways—for example, online dating is likely to make it more difficult to relate to a new partner physically because the initial connection has been built less on physical attraction (keeping in mind also that an encounter with an embodied other is different from seeing just a picture of the face) and more on shared interests, orientations, and life plans. Furthermore, our frequent involvement with the virtual world alienates us from our bodies, over time, and generally stands between us and a clearer sense of our bodily needs, preferences, desires, and possibilities. While these connections seem intuitively plausible and can be established more fully by describing the experience of our involvement with electronic media and especially social networks,<sup>1</sup> there is one influence of the technologized world that has been clearly established by now: the harmful impact of frequent exposure to internet pornography on one’s ‘real’ or ‘actual’ sex life. These detrimental effects are usually described under the heading of ‘erectile dysfunction’, though we will need to ask in due course whether a more holistic description might be more useful and could hopefully also pave the way for describing the effects on the female gender, for example.

The structure of this essay will establish the shortcomings of a purely scientific perspective before showing that a moralising perspective would certainly also be dissatisfying. After establishing how neuroscientific discussions of internet porn are

<sup>1</sup> See Staehler (2014) for a closer analysis.

often interpreted as pointing to a ‘refraining’ from porn and masturbation as the solution, we will consider the apparent opposite extreme: Platonic love. Interestingly, it turns out that the prevalent interpretations of Platonic love are as misplaced as the common conclusions drawn from the current scientific debates of internet pornography. What is needed instead is a more balanced approach that does not demonise sexuality or advise asceticism, but helps us refocus on what matters: our embodied being, and our relations to others.

## Internet Pornography and Its Side-Effects

Let us begin by attending to the widespread diagnosis, explanation, and advice in order to assess these. First of all, how can the effects of internet pornography be established? There are a number of obstacles on different levels. The first obstacle consists in establishing who uses internet pornography since this is not something we can necessarily expect people to be honest about. There are likely to be lots of people who use internet porn especially for masturbation, but if asked, might deny this, depending on the questioner, the context, the way the question is presented, etc. Secondly, it is conceivable that especially in the age group of adolescents, some might say ‘yes’ because they think this is what ‘one’ does nowadays, but in fact, they might only look at it with friends while by themselves perhaps preferring shooting games or other virtual entertainment, and might thus in effect not actually be internet porn users. In other words, there is leeway for deception and errors in both directions.

David Spiegelhalter corroborates such hesitation with respect to the actual surveys that have taken place. The survey that is presented as the most encompassing one, carried out by Channel Four in preparation for their highly successful programme “The Sex Education Show” claims that “58% of all 14- to 17-year-olds have viewed pornography online, on mobile phones, in magazines, films or on TV, and more than a quarter of boys looked at porn at least once a week, with 5% of them viewing it every day” (in Spiegelhalter 2015, 245). Yet as Spiegelhalter points out, there are methodological problems on various levels. One level of interference stems from asking the parents for permission to ask their children. It is likely that a certain category of parents—probably the most prudish ones—would be most likely to say, no, hence skewing the sample. Second level of interference: the children are put on the phone. They might think (and might be right) that their parents can overhear what they are saying, might believe that the caller has informed the parents of the precise question, and would therefore be more likely to deny using internet porn. The second level of interference can luckily be factored in by saying that *at least* 58% have seen porn; in other words, there might well be more. But on the second level, it is unlikely that anybody would say, yes, if the correct answer was, no (since bragging before one’s parents in this respect is much less likely than, for example, in front of peers). Yet the first level of interference is unpredictable and could well skew the data in the other direction as it is likely that the children of prudish parents might be especially drawn to this accessible and private alternative without the interviewer being able to find out about this. Spiegelhalter does not explicitly consider this first level of interference,

but concludes generally that it is difficult to establish results with any real reliability in this area. Nonetheless, it seems likely and within certain margins of error established that a high proportion especially of young people use internet porn quite regularly.

In the next step, it then needs to be established that it has a detrimental effect on their sex life, and at this point, similar interfering factors kick in. A lot depends on who asks the question and in what context. Yet this time, even more would depend on how the question is phrased. To give two extremes: “Are you experiencing any problems with your sex life?” would likely pick up a wide variety of issues far beyond erectile dysfunction, potentially even the ‘problem’ of not having a sex life. On the other hand, asking explicitly about ‘erectile dysfunction’ would likely lead to unreliable results because not everybody will know what this is, some might not want to phrase their problems in this way, etc.

While one might be doubtful about the possibility of ever establishing the precise numbers that would show the influence of internet pornography, there is a lot of qualitative research by way of case studies that confirm the link between frequent usage of internet pornography and erectile dysfunction. Further evidence comes from the simple therapy available: refraining from watching internet porn cures erectile dysfunction in the vast majority of cases where internet porn has been used; though it can take a bit of time. The people who have undergone such healing are so amazed—and often wish they had known sooner—that they are not hesitant to present their cases on the internet.<sup>2</sup>

While this has given rise to the neuroscientific research that we will examine in a moment, there is yet another element of ambiguity that should be considered. This is again a matter of how to exactly present and interpret the matter. The success stories have given rise to a movement that calls itself “no fapping” (where “fapping” is internet slang for masturbation, for reasons apparently unknown). In this movement, the underlying assumption seems to be that masturbation is detrimental, regardless of using or not using internet porn. Admittedly, it might indeed be a good idea for people with erectile dysfunction to try abstinence from masturbation as well—though our intuition would be that if no actual relationship is on the horizon, ‘normal’ masturbation without internet porn might be a decent enough strategy to keep one’s sanity and not appear too desperate. Yet ‘no fapping’ groups tend to promote the message that masturbation depletes the body of energy. Thus they return us to certain prudish (in the widest sense) traditions over the centuries when masturbation was overall considered a vice, suspected to cause detrimental effects on body, soul, or both. Evoking guilt in this way might work well for some people who can indeed benefit from abstinence (although we consider it likely to be a placebo as far as energy is concerned); yet others might experience detrimental effects and become (even) more alienated from their bodies, needs and desires. We will get back to this issue when considering Platonic love below.

Now to the neuroscientific explanations. Love et al. (2015) argue that internet pornography addiction is a behavioral addiction, and the further relevant options and questions follow behavioural addiction research. But that is a tautological

<sup>2</sup> E.g., [www.nofap.com](http://www.nofap.com); [www.ybop.com](http://www.ybop.com).

conclusion, taking us to the more general level. If we want to find the deeper dimension of the specific phenomenon, it is indeed helpful that Gary Wilson points out that erectile dysfunction affects both internet porn addicts and serious users who do not qualify as addicts (Wilson 2015). The phenomenon cuts across the addiction/non-addiction division. The scenery is complicated even further when looking at the different case studies that Wilson presents. Their diversity shows that the problem is indeed not sufficiently delineated.

According to Gary Wilson, the main reason why internet porn affects our actual sex life adversely lies in the so-called ‘Coolidge effect’. Yet the evidence for the ‘Coolidge effect’ that describes how animals ejaculate faster when given the opportunity to mate with lots of new females rather than repeatedly the same comes from male hamsters, guinea pigs, goats, and rats.<sup>3</sup> We would like to argue that human sexual interaction is different from that of animals in several ways, including the possibility of habituating a successful routine with a long-term partner. The habit body examined below is different from a body moved solely by natural instinct because not only can we remember having had good sex with a particular person, but we can also learn an intercorporeal routine together and communicate our sexual needs, as well as respond to the desirous expressions of the other. Even the anatomy of the animals’ genitals should make us doubtful about the possibility of comparing animal mating with human sex.<sup>4</sup> In claiming that human sex is different from animal sex, we do not deny that animals have a soul. But it seems to us that human sex can be more soulful than animal sex.

If we reject ‘Coolidge effect’ for an explanation of erectile dysfunction, what can we suggest instead? The way in which sex is represented. Of course, there are enormous variations, from the gentle (for example, in lots of amateur porn) to SM, fetish, big objects, etc. But on average, the representation of ‘wanting it’ and being able to ‘do it’ is highly emphasised in porn. Foreplay is very goal-orientated and does not serve an exploration of the body. Etc. The intermediate realm that plays such an important role in actual sex gets lost, especially flirtation.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Gary Wilson’s explanation mostly relied on issues around novelty (as in wanting to get onto a new ‘high’ of the curve, climaxing faster with new partners, expecting novelty with each new click of the mouse or touchpad key, etc.). Yet clicking, distractedness, passivity, and even the potential for addiction would to our mind be better explained in the context of how the internet generally affects us, and not just internet porn. As we will argue below, actual sex is intrinsically transgressive because it means relating to a whole other person and involves relating with my own strange body to their strange body. Internet porn is missing this transgressive element, which is why we are more likely to ‘tag’ transgressive techniques. This is similar to the way in which actual social interactions confront me with the depth and richness of an entire other person and their meaningful world, whereas social networks only create the appearance thereof and become addictive or

<sup>3</sup> See Wilson (2015) as well as Fiorino et al. (1997) and Prado et al. (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Among many peculiar anatomical facts, let us just mention spiked penises (cats) and cork-screw-like penises (ducks).

<sup>5</sup> See Kozin (2016).

at least frustrating by way of their emptiness: they cannot deliver actual interpersonal encounters.<sup>6</sup>

By pointing out—against neuroscientific explanations—that human sex is different from animal mating, we do not mean to set up a hierarchy where humans would be ‘superior’ to animals. Existentialism has shown long ago that being human means being more exposed to anxiety (as we are more aware of our finitude which can come to ‘hit’ us even in the most benign situations), more awkward due to our ambiguous subject/object status, and generally more prone to negative moods on the basis of being mindful, remembering, reflecting, and so on. We need to learn utilising these capacities to our favour rather than detriment, especially in the realm of sexuality. Animals can much more simply rely on being guided through the process by instinct; once we become self-aware and also aware of the possibility of failure (as in erectile dysfunction), anxiety easily kicks in. Because we are not superior to animals, but are struggling more than them, this essay suggests focussing on what makes us human in order to resolve our sexual difficulties.

How, then, about Platonic love as a possibility? While the ‘no fapping’ movement in a sense seems to suggest exactly this move, we would like to oppose it here, on the basis of the Platonic dialogues that are much more erotic and ‘pro’ sexuality than usually assumed.

## Plato ‘Contra’ Sex: Or So It Seemed

In this section, we will be concerned with those passages in the Platonic dialogues that appear to have given rise to the predominant idea of Platonic love: asexual or non-sexual love. We would like to argue that this concept is misplaced, in light of the dialogues. Taking the counter-position in its strength, we aim to show that the most prominent passages that appear to argue against a sexual component in love relationships can actually be interpreted differently.

First point of call will be Plato’s *Republic* (1997). In his most well-known dialogue, a number of the well-known components of Platonism are seen to arise. At the very beginning and in a prominent place, we learn from Cephalus that he is very relieved to no longer be exposed to the tyranny of sexual desires since Eros is a “frenzied and savage master” (*Rep.* 328c). Undoubtedly, this tyranny is presented as something problematic. But what is it precisely that is seen as troublesome here? First of all, it is not ruled out that Cephalus might still engage in sexual activity; he is just no longer dominated by it as a kind of tyrant of the soul, as was the case when he was younger. In other words, we are dealing with a contrastive statement here: Cephalus is glad that sexual drive no longer plays the kind of role in his life that it used to play. That is an understandable statement since it can indeed be a relief, perhaps especially for a man, to no longer experience sexual desire as a kind of itch that at a young age at times makes itself so present as to distract from everything else. Again, a more relaxed and less immediately needy attitude about sex does not

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<sup>6</sup> See Staehler (2014).

rule out having it, but might even allow for a more balanced approach and a more relaxed attitude towards finding a partner.

But how about the overall theory that underpins Plato's position here? Is it not indeed the emphasis on reason as ruling part of the soul (against feelings as irrational) that we conceive as one of the main characteristics Platonism is so infamous for? It is difficult, of course, to unravel the complicated and very influential history of Platonism. A major philosophical voice in this history has been Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche has notoriously described Platonism as 'Christianity for the people', thereby confirming an impression that Plato, in turn famous for his statement about the body as a prison for the soul (*Phaedo* 82c), was hostile to the body like Christianity. This presentation of Christianity cannot be taken at face value, of course, since Nietzsche needs to generally be taken with a grain of salt and attention to interpretative ambiguity (keep in mind, for example, that one of the most famous statements in his own philosophy, when it comes to the body, is to bring a 'whip' when going to visit the opposite gender). It is merely cited here to indicate the 'drift' of Nietzsche's influential Plato interpretation.

Nietzsche is one of the Plato interpreters who has seduced us into taking Socrates more seriously than any other voice in the dialogues; yet by pointing us to the extreme and sometimes even absurd results of taking Socrates at face value, Nietzsche could also be conceived as the philosopher who made us aware that we do need to consider the other voices as well. Furthermore, the Christian apprehension about corporeality yet simultaneous focus on the body has given rise to some interesting expressions including Augustine's *Confessions*; the Christian attitude should not be underestimated as a resource for erotic phantasies (including the role of sexuality in the Bible). We will need to return to the issue of the body under the next heading below and see to what extent we can argue that Plato is actually quite mindful of the body, more so than other philosophers—with the exception of twentieth century phenomenologists—but this will need to be discussed under the heading 'Plato "pro" sex'. For now, we can conclude that Nietzsche is the kind of reader of Plato's philosophy who alerts us to the complexities of Plato's writings where taking Plato literally, on an isolated statement, can easily have absurd consequences.<sup>7</sup>

Since this section is overall searching for the strongest arguments 'contra' sex, we should immediately focus on the two most striking instances in the *Symposium*. Each of them needs to be read also against arguments from other parts of the dialogue. The first relates to what is usually conceived as the core of the *Symposium*, though we need to keep in mind our general conviction that has arisen in this section, namely, not to take it for granted that Socrates or any one particular interlocutor in a given dialogue would have the monopoly to the truth or would be presenting Plato's position. There is undoubtedly something special about the conceived centre of the *Symposium*, that is, Socrates recounting Diotima's speech. Diotima at times makes fun of Socrates, and she is generally eager to point out that her truth might be not for him. But if it is not, this is likely to indicate that it is a

<sup>7</sup> The same holds for Nietzsche's own writings which philosophers like Jacques Derrida or Luce Irigaray have deconstructed in productive ways.



truth which is generally hard, perhaps impossible, for humans to grasp. This truth would consist in the realisation that there are more beautiful things than a beautiful body. Ultimately, the most beautiful are beautiful ideas and beauty itself. But on the way there, we find a peculiar suggestion which should indeed be another reminder that we need to interpret Plato rather than reading him literally. Diotima points out (through Socrates) that the initial step is from one beautiful body to many beautiful bodies. This is the step of realising that beauty is not exclusive, that is, it is not exclusive to one person, but beauty is a more encompassing and excessive quality that extends to many things in this world: objects, bodies, and even ideas. So far, so good. Yet since the step from one beautiful body to many beautiful bodies does not have to be taken literally (that is, it is not a recommendation to literally engage in erotic relations with many beautiful bodies), we also do not need to assume that the realisation about the possibility of beauty beyond the visible world would require an abandonment of the visible, bodily world. It is one of the peculiar yet intriguing features of Plato's philosophy in general that he tends to give us analogies which require attending to their possibilities as well as limitations. For example, all three famous allegories in the *Republic* involve an element of vision (sun, line, cave) despite the fact that all three of them ultimately intend to alert us to that which is beyond the visible, and thus the allegory also contains its own point of contrast. Similarly with the *Symposium*: we become aware that there is the possibility of attending to spiritual beauty and even to give birth to beautiful ideas; but if love leads us into philosophy, as Plato seems to suggest across the board, then this will still be a philosophy that is undertaken together, with another human being in the flesh, and it is only together that we would give birth to beautiful ideas. There is no specific reason why the two products of Eros, children and ideas, might not even both emerge from one and the same relationship, though ideas prove more stable (and less whiny!).

The second moment concerns Alcibiades and his failed attempt at seducing Socrates. Yet despite the description being quite sexy (for example, when Alcibiades describes crawling under Socrates's cloak), it is also a description that shows how presumptuous Alcibiades is. He is used to being desired, and he thinks that the mere presence of his body will win Socrates over. No such luck with Socrates. At least as far as the remainder of the *Symposium* goes, we get the impression that Socrates is quite fond of flirtation, and the final conversation between him, Alcibiades, and Agathon is certainly exemplary. Moreover, there are reasons (which cannot be discussed here in detail) as to why Socrates as the beloved represents an important addendum to the discussion and allows Plato to provide something like a more encompassing phenomenology of Eros, including lover, beloved, and the erotic desire between them. It should also be considered that Plato's writings mark the very beginning of reflecting on and disciplining one's sexual life, and given the complicated power relations especially between older male teachers and younger male students, there could be an emancipatory element (though not a feminist one!) in emphasising that a sexual interest like that of Alcibiades's does not mean that the object of desire would be obligated to give in.

We cannot pursue the discussion further at this point, but it should be noted that several of the other inhibitions about Eros, such as the fact that love might make us

neglect our friends and relatives and turn almost exclusively to our beloved indeed represents one of the dangers of love; yet pointing out a danger can be helpful without there being any particular need to then abandon the precarious dimension altogether. Plus, the absorbing character of love is not peculiar to sexual love alone. Love is ambiguous, and we will now attend to the ‘other’ side of love.

## Plato ‘pro’ Sex: Within Reason

Why are the authors of this article convinced that Plato included the possibility of sexual relations in his idea of erotic love? The reasons are operating on a number of levels. Beyond the explicit statements in the dialogues, there are a number of surrounding factors that are important to consider. The discussion here will move from a more general description of the character of Plato’s writings to the explicit statements.

It should be noted from the outset that Plato’s philosophy is much more of a flesh-and-blood philosophy than other philosophical treatise because we are dealing here with dialogues, and the interlocutors in the dialogues make themselves present. At times, this happens through explicit statements about themselves, their relations to each other, and their preferences. At other times, the characters become present just through speaking, where somebody’s style of speaking always makes them appear to us in a certain way, calling forth a phantasy image of sorts.

Another crucial element concerns the interactions between the interlocutors. There is a lot of explicit flirtation especially in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. But even more generally, we see the dialogue partners react to each other, and again, us reading these exchanges confronts us at least in our phantasy with actual flesh-and-blood people speaking, laughing, objecting, agreeing, and so on. Philosophising together is always to some extent erotic, so Plato’s philosophy teaches us, because it is the love for ideas that motivates the discussion. And even when Socrates speaks to those who resist philosophy and do not want to be drawn in, the erotic element is tangible as he is trying to convince them that the love for wisdom, questions, and dialogues which he is disclosing to them through his own example is worthwhile pursuing, and attractive as an endeavour for life (despite all its dangers). Socrates as a philosopher wants to show himself as lovable in order to best pursue the cause of philosophy as he understands it, namely, through dialogue.

True, it is in these discussions that our complicated relationship to matters of the body and nature emerges at times. If the previous section focussed mostly on Eros in the *Symposium*, this section will take its guidance from the other main dialogue on love, the *Phaedrus*. The *Phaedrus* is another dialogue that reminds us how important it is to consider each dialogue as a whole and not just the most well-known and often indeed most ‘Platonic’ passages. The opening of the dialogue sets the frame for the famous myth of the chariots. In the opening passages, we find Socrates describing himself as a stranger (Greek *xenos*) to nature (*Phaedrus* 230d), which could easily be read also as a turn away from the body. The argument Socrates provides is straightforward: he claims that only humans teach him, not landscapes. While the human body certainly falls more on the side of humans than

on that of landscapes, it nonetheless appears, generally speaking, that he is also a bit of a stranger when it comes to matters of the body. But being a stranger does not mean being opposed; it also means being intrigued, while being aware that we are dealing with a dimension that is alien to our normal understanding. This intrigue leads Socrates to make an attempt and describe as well as assess the situation: “Feel the freshness of the air; how pretty and pleasant it is; how it echoes with the summery, sweet song of the cicadas’ chorus! The most exquisite thing of all, of course, is the grassy slope: it rises so gently that you can rest your head perfectly when you lie down on it” (230c).

The fact that Socrates is intrigued by matters of the body and especially physical love becomes obvious again in the context of the famous myth of the chariots in the middle of the *Phaedrus*: both horses are needed, the good and the problematic one, to pull the soul along. Even bad erotic love, Socrates argues is better than the “human self-discipline of the non-lover” (*Phaedr.* 162b). But is this statement not indeed utterly surprising, given that self-discipline (Greek *sophrosyne*) is elsewhere described as one of the main virtues which the scholastics termed ‘cardinal’? How can there be anything wrong, from a Platonic perspective, with self-discipline? Mind you, it is “human self-discipline” that is at stake here and is contrasted with the divine gift of erotic madness. Human self-discipline—a human rather than divine way of interpreting self-control, which in this case means a restrictive and not very wise way of dealing with the dangers of love.

Human self-discipline in this context means avoiding love altogether and staying with friendship, which would lead us back to the position presented in the flawed speech composed by Lysis which *Phaedrus* read out. Going with the one who does not love you—this is not good advice, from Socrates’s perspective, since this does not open up a way into philosophy. Going with a prohibition on physical love rather than a balanced approach—this is again not good advice, from Socrates’s perspective, since we are well capable of negotiating the benefits and dangers of erotic and even sexual involvement. To give a parallel example from the *Symposium*: we never see Socrates drunk (*Symp.* 98a), but this does not mean at all that he would not enjoy wine tremendously!

But how are we to establish a balanced relationship to sexual activity? The general advice from the *Phaedrus* here coincides in certain, perhaps initially troubling ways with the *Republic*: the rational part of the soul needs to take control of the soul’s movement. Yet has the emphasis on reason and rationality (*logos*) not been a crucial aspect of Platonism that indeed supports the ‘contra sex’ side? Not necessarily. Taking control of a movement means in both contexts for the different parts of the soul to successfully work together, not for one to suppress the others. In the *Republic*, the emphasis lies on the soul’s harmony and resulting happiness which could not be achieved by just repressing the other parts of the soul, appetitive (*epithumia*) and spirited (*thumos*), but by indeed directing them into a balanced movement. Quite similar in the *Phaedrus*: both the good and the bad horse are needed for the soul’s movement, and the rational part is meant to steer this fragile endeavour.

What we should keep in mind here as well, by way of contextualising the statements historically, is that we are dealing with one of the first political

communities or states, that is, an organised way of living together which is set out in such a way that people have more time and opportunity for erotic encounters, but need to also learn reflecting on the dangers of such encounters, especially where problematic power relations (e.g., student/teacher, poor/rich) are at stake. Plato's account is indeed quite balanced here in that he explicitly acknowledges the significance of love (in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*) and the fact that sexual pleasures are the most intense such that sexual intercourse can serve as a reward for the best soldiers (*Rep.* 460b), but also reflects on the need to be (somewhat) rational about one's erotic pursuits.

## **Phenomenology of Sex, or Learning to Own (Up to) Our Strange Bodies**

What follows, then, from our considerations so far? We have seen that neuroscientific explanations have a tendency to either move in circles, not going far enough but only creating an appearance of movement, or importing unreliable explanations based on animal behaviour, thus going too far in their attempt to explain. We have also seen that the perspective which might appear as the epitome of a moralising approach, namely, Plato's, has been misunderstood to imply some superiority of sexual abstinence when in fact, there is just a recommendation of balance and keeping one's appetites within reason. If maintained within reason, physical erotic activity and spiritual loving growth do not exclude each other, but belong together, in ways that admittedly need to be worked out in relation to the individuals involved, their souls, and their situations. Negotiating the relation between specific individuals, their souls and situations is again a task in which a balance between reason and desires will be helpful.

We have thus in a number of ways been returned to some of our most basic everyday intuitions and convictions about love and sexuality. We have seen that the neuroscientific perspective, where it is at its strongest, confirms everyday convictions, as we will see more closely in relation to habitualisation below. This includes the everyday conviction that considers sexual activity conducive to our well-being if we stay within the bounds of what is good and acceptable for us as well as good and acceptable for the other person. But is a return to everyday insights not rather disappointing as a 'conclusion'? It does not have to be, if we discover a way of examining our everyday convictions further in order to understand them better and on a more basic or deeper level. There is a branch of philosophy which has made it its goal to do exactly that: phenomenology. Phenomenology attends to our everyday ideas and intuitions or our 'natural attitude', and shed a new light on this attitude by taking some distance and reflecting back on it. This movement is not trivial; its description has kept phenomenology busy since its inception until the current days.

Some problems with describing this change of attitude concern the very relation between phenomenology and the natural attitude. Edmund Husserl, founder of phenomenology, described this move with the help of the term *epoché* borrowed from the ancient sceptics, announcing a 'suspension of' or 'refraining from' the natural attitude. Yet it is crucial to keep in mind that Husserl had already

emphasised how the phenomenological relation to the natural attitude is always a move of getting further into it, digging deeper, understanding better, rather than any kind of turning one's back or turning away from. The whole effort of phenomenology is then in a sense an attempt to understand the natural attitude better than it understands itself, or to engage with its convictions on a deeper and methodologically more grounded level. But how can phenomenology describe itself as scientific and at the same time claim to overcome the Scylla and Charybdis of tautological versus overly speculative explanations? Phenomenology has always found it easier and methodologically more consistent to exhibit its possibilities with respect to a phenomenon under investigation rather than in general terms that face the risk of being empty or abstract while phenomenology wants to be concrete.

In relationship to sexuality, we find an important early exploration in Merleau-Ponty's chapter 'The Body in its Sexual Being' in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. According to Merleau-Ponty, sexuality does not constitute a specific, clearly delimited area of existence. It is impossible to determine the boundaries of sexuality (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 194/196). The erotic can make itself present quite suddenly because it is "at all times present there like an atmosphere" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 195/196). It goes to the merit of psychoanalysis to have alerted us to this. In the case of patient Schneider whom Merleau-Ponty discusses, his sexual difficulties go hand in hand with difficulties to maintain friendships, where he also shows a certain kind of inertia. However, it would be misleading to equate existence with sexuality. If psychoanalytic theories convey the impression that existence and sexuality are co-extensive, they go too far. For example, someone can be very active and successful in his professional life, and passive to the point of inaction in his sexual life, or the other way round (as in the case of Casanova; Merleau-Ponty 1962, 184/186). These brief comments serve only to clarify Merleau-Ponty's position on sexuality, and how it seems to him that psychoanalysis opens up sexuality as a theme for theory but fails to point out clearly that existence and sexuality are not co-extensive. Of course, it is tempting to be vague about the boundaries of sexuality since, as Merleau-Ponty points out, it is impossible to determine these boundaries. That is where the phenomenological concept of ambiguity carries lots of weight because for Merleau-Ponty, it is very helpful to acknowledge and explore ambiguity.

This cannot be the place to examine more closely whether Merleau-Ponty is right about psychoanalysis or whether he, like in the cases of intellectualism and empiricism, sets up a counter position which is not as such held by any specific psychoanalyst, but which presents a tendency of psychoanalysis that Merleau-Ponty highlights because it allows him to clarify his own position. This is also not to say that psychoanalysis is incompatible with the position espoused in this essay; it lies beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the methodological tensions between phenomenology and psychoanalysis or to examine how an interface could be created.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Of many promising authors whose work generally explores such a possibility, we would just like to mention Edward S. Casey, Alison Stone, and Talia Welsh. On Merleau-Ponty and Freud, see Moya and Larrain (2016).

From a phenomenological perspective, the task becomes to rethink sexuality rather than to ask how much of life rests on sexuality. Sexuality is part of a general openness to the world, as is speech. My body can shut itself off and open itself up, and in this way, psycho-symptomatic pathologies like aphasia (loss of speech) or certain sexual dysfunctions come about. The result is that sexuality cannot be clearly delimited but permeates existence, and at the same time is not co-extensive with the latter. This shows that sexuality is a more striking part of the ambiguity that determines our overall lived existence.

Our movement in this essay resembles Merleau-Ponty's in that he likes to reedy shortcomings of extreme or one-sided positions. What are our findings? Is his conclusion that the erotic is an atmosphere helpful for our topic? Would not, to the contrary, one of the contributing factors to the addictive potential of internet pornography be the fact that we get absorbed into its atmosphere and think about it in such a way as to constantly want to return to it? After all, one of the plausible results of the neuroscientific perspective was the discovery that the dangers of internet porn do not only apply in cases of addiction.

A phenomenological perspective allows describing the addictive potential of internet porn in a different way, as far as the phenomenon or the experience of internet porn is concerned. It is one of the experiences presented to us by the modern, technologized world, and as a detailed account could show, there are features of virtual reality that create an illusion of overcoming the confinement to our bodies that we experience. Yet it is not possible to get away from our bodies; important phenomenological findings concern the body as a 'constant here' that we cannot leave behind, such that we 'are' our bodies rather than 'have' them. For the remainder of this article, we will introduce two slightly surprising results that emerge from a phenomenological perspective on love between embodied beings. The first discovery is that all bodies are strange, even my own.

## **First Discovery: All Bodies are Strange, Even My Own**

In an episode of drama series 'Six Feet Under', there is a dialogue in which Claire, youngest offspring of the undertaker family that is at the core of the series, explains to her homosexual brother David why she thought it a good idea to try engaging in lesbian activities with a homosexual girlfriend (yet Claire ends up uncomfortable/unaroused at the last minute): 'I thought it would be nice to deal with sexual organs that are not alien to you' (in an earlier episode, Claire had lamented that she would never get enough access to penises to become as good at handling them as a masturbating owner of them would be). To which her brother David responds: 'Claire, sexual organs are always alien unless they are your own.' To this, we can add with Jean-Luc Nancy: not just unless they are your own, but *even if* they are your own. This result, however, requires some careful consideration for it to become phenomenologically plausible, and we also need to make sure not to blur distinctions such that everything falls into the same category which we then call 'alien'.

The idea that interests us is the following train of thought. We tend to be estranged from our bodies, due to a combination of historical, religious, and phenomenological factors; the latter will be spelled out a bit in a moment. In the contemporary world, we are provided with the option of distancing us further from our bodies by way of information and entertainment technologies. We attend to the screen and away from ourselves, and if we want to, we can present ourselves in certain ways via social media. Yet if we want to avoid the detrimental consequences of relying on the computer for sexuality, some of which are spelled out in this article, we need to learn to live with ourselves. More precisely, and this is the somewhat surprising claim this passage would like to make, we need to acknowledge the strangeness of our bodies to stop running away from them, and learn owning up to them instead. We need to learn owning (up to) our strange bodies.

Why are our bodies strange? What is the phenomenological foundation for establishing this, given that the historical and religious reasons do not really fall within the remit of this article? The phenomenological reasons are related to our being an object, that is, the side of our existence that describes how we are perceivable, visible, touchable, etc. This is a phenomenological or experience-based observation since we indeed experience ourselves in this way—but not only in this way. We are also perceiving, seeing, touching, etc., and that is our subject-being. As phenomenologists like Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir have explored in detail, we experience ourselves in this somewhat schizophrenic subject-object fashion, but we do not understand ourselves in this fashion. We do not reflect on our being object as well as subject, and especially not on the dilemmas implied in this, such as the dilemma of wanting to be regarded as a subject by the other person while also being their object of desire.

When Sartre claims that loving means wanting to be loved (Sartre 1969, 176), a number of observations follow. One can read this statement in a non-problematic fashion, in which case it basically means, loving somebody means wanting to be objectified by them in a loving way, or wanting to be turned into their object of desire. It also means, wanting the person who is your object of desire to regard you as their object of desire. Sartre, however, does not focus on such reciprocity and would likely deny the significance of it in light of love's other precious aspects, such as the danger that somebody falls for me to the extent that they turn into an uninteresting object of my desire since they are too smitten by me, or the danger of third parties interrupting the couple.

In any case, love turns out to be one of those dimensions of life where we have to negotiate our subject-being with our object-being, and because we are not used to such reflections, we struggle. We struggle also because there is indeed a deep philosophical as well as experiential problem here: I experience myself as 'one', as unified, as a single person, yet my two sides of being subject and being object come apart, and I cannot really bring them together, also given that my experience at any given moment is one of being a subject or being an object.

Despite Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on double sensations which have also influenced Luce Irigaray's considerations on female corporeality as the body

touching itself (lips touching),<sup>9</sup> there is not really a successful union with myself, on the level of corporeality. Already with Merleau-Ponty, we realise that our focus is either on the touching or on the being touched. Although being a body means that the hand which is touching the other can in the next moment be touched by the other hand, and this can even in principle be done without the hands needing to change position, our attention lies nonetheless with either the touching or the being touched.

When we encounter our body, we encounter it as an object (for us), and that means, as an object for a subject, and thus as something that is strange to this subject. Moreover, we encounter it as part of the material world, as anchoring us in and exposing us to the material world, and that world is uncanny in a number of ways. The most basic way in which world is uncanny comes about because world has always already pre-existed us and has been shaped by other people (and so have we, as philosophers like Irigaray and Nancy point out).

What, then, shall we do about this strangeness in ourselves and in others? Cross over, communicate, speak to one another. That is very difficult, for several reasons. It is difficult because in doing so, we turn ourselves into an object, which makes us uncomfortable. But we are also reflective of the subject dimension involved in it: how we phrase things, how we come across. While this inner dialogue is already difficult to bear, further problems impinge, such as the fact that we find it difficult to speak about matters of the body and about emotional matters. We have insufficient concepts available, and the concepts that we have tend to exhibit medical or humorous or obscene undertones which get in the way of a meaningful conversation.

Communication therapy is one response, and it is striking that Masters and Johnson, the first scientific sexuality researchers, give exactly this advice and expound in detail how communication therapy with a dual therapy team comprised of a man and a woman is necessary for heterosexual couples. It is necessary because of sexual difference and the difficulty of understanding sexuality in the other gender. Furthermore, it serves as a model and catalyst for communication across gender difference.

What makes their therapeutic suggestions too complex to be able to represent them here but undoubtedly contributes to their 80% success rate is that they distinguish very carefully between different forms of dysfunction. Furthermore, they explore the connections between them and explain, for example, why it is possible that some of the advice for treating premature ejaculation can lead to a phase of secondary impotence (Masters and Johnson 1970, 100). A lack of such differentiation is one of the most problematic features of the ‘no fapping’ movement, to my mind, since the internet pages on which case studies are displayed immediately show that a wide variety of rather different dysfunctions are all countered with the same, very undifferentiated tool: masturbation prohibition.

<sup>9</sup> “As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity. Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two but not divisible into one(s)-that caress each other.” Irigaray (1985), 24.



## Second Discovery: Habitualising Sex is a Good Thing

The suggestion that habitualising sex is a good thing might well be surprising. The biggest danger of habitualising sex—and thus also a good reminder of the reasons why the term ‘habit’ does not sit well with sexual activity—, can be phrased with the help of a little anecdote that is well known in Germany. The German anecdote comes in different versions, but the bottom line is as follows. Imagine a couple who has been married for many, many years. During all these years, they have always split a bread roll in the morning, where bread roll is an important cultural food item in Germany: ‘Brötchen’ refers to a crispy bread roll that has a crusty upper side. All these years, the husband has eaten the upper part because the wife at some point early on offered it to him, believing that this is the best part which she would like him to have. All these years, she has now been eating the lower part which she dis-prefers. And then it turns out, after many years, that the husband would have had a preference for the lower part. In other words, both of them were going with their dis-preferred option for all these years, believing they were doing a favour to the other person but were actually not, and they never communicated with each other about this, in the beginning or later one, so as to figure this out.

What do we learn from the story? We learn about the need to establish preferences before habitualising, by way of verbal or non-verbal communication. Speaking about sexual activity is something many people experience as a challenge anyway, and it is itself an activity that benefits from habitualising: if we can get used to speak about our sexual preferences and dis-preferences freely, all the better for long-term well-being. Note that this is one of the things we find out about Virginia Johnson in the drama series ‘Masters of Sex’, namely, that she knows what she likes in sexual matters, and is not shy to communicate it. It appears to be this ability that also inspires her to believe that her research will increase overall well-being: if we learn to understand better how sexual desire works and learn to communicate about it, this will help our sexual experiences (Bancroft and Graham 2014). Finding appropriate concepts would also benefit the phenomenology of sexuality. Maier designates Johnson as ‘almost existential’ in her approach: “‘It helps to realize that the vagina is a potential, rather than an actual space, in its unstimulated state,’ Johnson later explained, almost existentially” (Maier 2009, 167).

The benefits of habitualising sexual activity are obvious: they allow for an immersion in the activity, focussing on the body and its enjoyment without distraction through negotiation and decision-making. Having sex habitually and regularly also keeps up the erotic atmosphere that becomes difficult to establish once it has been lost. On the other hand, it is certainly also important to allow for the kind of thing called ‘creativity’, that is, trying something new. But this can best be integrated into a habitualised, reassuring context, and it is not difficult to indicate, by words or without, that one is in the mood for experimentation.

The reader might by now wonder, perhaps with irritation, if we have not lost sight of our initial problem, namely, internet pornography, which presumably affects those people most strongly who are not in a relationship and thus not be in a

position to habitualise sex. What are they supposed to do? Habitualise pick-up lines, as a cynical perspective might suggest? Well, perhaps not so cynical, if it leads to more self-confidence over time. But here as well, a combination of habit and creativity is certainly what is needed, or the possibility of responding in a habitual way to a new situation.

Furthermore, we would even go so far as to suggest that a habitualised masturbation routine can be a way out of the internet pornography dilemma, in the sense that it would more likely invite a certain amount of self-discipline and sticking to routinized times and places. But most importantly, any routinisation on the bodily level makes success of the activity more predictable, where success in the case of masturbation would mean orgasm. Part of the observational results around internet pornography point to it becoming more and more difficult over time to still reach orgasm—the phenomenon explained by neuroscientists under the heading of ‘Coolidge effect’ which we have problematized above. While this would be true on average, but not true in each individual case, there is an even more widespread tendency observable with internet porn, namely, the tendency to go to more extreme versions of sexual activity and ‘tag’ the kinds of sex one would not actually engage in or show preference for. One obvious yet nonetheless important case in point is anal sex which many more people watch than actually practice. What is the reason for this, from a phenomenological perspective? We would like to claim that there are two main reasons: (1) the intrinsically empty nature of internet pornography<sup>10</sup> and (2) the transgressive nature of sex which gets mostly lost in internet porn, thereby leaving us to search for something more fully transgressive, such as anal sex.

Anal sex is transgressive in two respects: it transgresses our ‘normal’ ideas of sex and moves us into taboo territory, and it manifests on the visual level as a more visibly transgressive activity, that is, an activity that requires more effort, more coordination, more communication (not necessarily with words), more interaction from body to body. In that sense, anal sex in porn resembles actual, everyday sex more than what we see by way of vaginal sex in porn, which can appear rather detached to the point of resembling a gymnastics activity.

What follows from this is that actual sex with real people is by nature more transgressive—given that we are dealing with the Other’s strange body and with our own strange body, as discussed in the previous section—, and we thus do not need to go to any extremes to make it transgressive. Sexual activity connects two strange bodies, two bodies who are subject and object, capable of suffering as well as enjoyment, requiring communication or more precisely, intercorporeality and coordination for any activity to be successful. If we can thus learn to habitualise transgression, also in our own relation to our bodies, we might even be able to learn the use of internet porn—whether the situation is one of loneliness or a shared interest—without danger of losing our desire. Loss of desire is one of the scariest prospects, given the close connection between desire and life. We are thus led to try

<sup>10</sup> For a brilliant ethnographic description of existential emptiness and boredom around the Pornography Film Awards, see DF Wallace (2007), “Big Red Son”.

and generate more desire; but this requires an engagement with the actual other who is strange in more ways than one: infinitely intriguing as well as uncanny.

If we learn that sexuality is intrinsically transgressive, we will not be surprised to find that a satisfying sexual relationship cannot be found in front of a screen in the safety of my home, but requires me to seek out and communicate with the Other. Flirtation is the necessary step to prepare for such transgression, and as Levinas teaches us, the erotic encounter is an encounter in which the Other appears as a creature of the between: between materiality and spirituality, thus evoking ambiguous love between need and desire.

What can Levinas teach us about flirtation? Flirtation is talk in the mode of Eros, or erotic talk. According to Levinas, “erotic talk” can be “interpreted as sensation” (Levinas 1969, 254). For Levinas, the sexual basis of erotic talk is clearly problematic. “When, in Freud, sexuality is approached on the human plane, it is reduced to the level of the search for pleasure, without the ontological signification of voluptuosity and the irreducible categories it brings into play. The pleasure is given ready-made; one reasons on the basis of it” (1969, 276). Instead, Levinas offers a bioscopic view of the phenomenal world. From this perspective, erotic desire and its language form the boundary that both separates and connects Eros to being, without excluding sexuality, allowing it to participate in the event of transcendence whose epiphany speaks a language of its own, the language of Eros. The erotic nudity of the face designates “a way, the way of remaining in the *no man’s land* between being and not-yet being” (Ibid., 259: *authors’ italics*).

The difference between the two co-joint modes is the difference of the self-other relation. “Voluptuosity begins already in erotic desire and *remains* desire at each instant” (Levinas 1969, 259: *authors’ italics*). It is never satisfied, its search is never over. It embraces the lovers in the here and now. What can be said about this? The answer will be *not much*, for the language of Eros is the silent language, and *everything*, for this silence reverberates in enjoyment. “The erotic nudity is a word that bespeaks not a meaning but exhibition” (Levinas 1969, 263). The lover laughs and by doing so, abandons the discourse of production, renders sex irrelevant, ceases to be a signifying human, slides into irresponsible animality: “The relations with the Other are enacted in play; one plays with the Other as with a young animal” (Ibid., 263). From this perspective, flirtation can be defined as an indication of erotic nudity, a positive modification of erotic talk. Although wordless, it would connote a special kind of ambiguity, sexual but already beyond sexuality.

How could this ambiguity be given in flirtation? Levinas suggests that we might find the answer in the concept of caress. He calls caress sensibility that transcends the sensible. It searches for the ‘what’ which there is not there yet. It is a promise of more than there is at hand. In a certain sense, writes Levinas, it expresses love but is not able to tell it. The caressing touch, glance, sound are content-less. They do not communicate anything outside themselves, but only their own way or mode of being, which Levinas rightfully calls “tenderness”. If we think about the caress and what kind of ‘thing’ it is, we receive a pointer towards phenomenology because the caress is not about ‘what’ is being touched, but about ‘how’ the touching happens—just like phenomenology wants to alert us to ‘how’ we experience things and bodies, rather than our usual focus on ‘what’ we perceive.

If we learned this shift from our normal obsession with the ‘what’ to the much more intriguing focus on ‘how’ the erotic experience differs from our everyday concerns, we could find a passivity at the core of our existence. Such an original passivity is prior to the division of suffering versus enjoyment; it names our original openness to the world that can turn into various kinds of experiences. Passivity of the caress aborts any possibility for action; it does not call for action towards a ‘what’, but allows for an experience of the original openness to the world. Simultaneously, it abolishes the aiming movement of erotic desire. Instead, it reinstitutes desire in the experience and ambiguity of love. The ambiguity of the caress—between need and desire, between sensibility and non-sensibility—would not be a shortcoming, but an opportunity. Thus defined, erotic flirtation could retain its sexuality, yet become irreducible to sex.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** Author Tanja Staehler declares that she has no conflict of interest. Author Alexander Kozin declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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